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THE FAILED MISSION

The Inside Account of the Attempt to Free the Hostages in Iran

By Zbigniew Brzezinski

INTRODUCTION It has been almost two years since the bold, ambitious attempt to rescue the American hostages in Teheran collapsed in flames on a bleak stretch of Iranian desert. Here, in the first account by a key participant, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, tells of the months of secret planning, meticulous preparation and spirited debate that led to the rescue attempt.

Although the details of the mission have been examined in this magazine and elsewhere, a number of new facts and insights emerge from Dr. Brzezinski's account, which is based on his recollections and a journal he kept during the 14-month hostage crisis. They include the following:

- One day before the raid, the President rejected a plan that cloaked the rescue attempt in a larger, punitive, military assault on Iran, designed to help salvage the national prestige if the rescue failed.
 - The military was instructed to stage a collision with a Russian ship, if necessary, to prevent detection of the mission.
 - Carter considered a plan to seize some of the Iranian captors as counterhostages, but ultimately authorized holding them only until the planned takeoff from Iran.
 - Carter's deep personal concern about inflicting casualties was a constant element in the planning of the mission; he directed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to make it his personal responsibility to see that no "wanton killings" resulted from the raid.
 - A critical weakness in the rescue plan — the insufficient number of helicopters — was raised by a senior military officer in a whispered aside at a key White House meeting shortly before the mission.
 - Preparations for the raid included an advance, on-site intelligence probe to locate an appropriate place in the desert to land aircraft.
- Reading the Brzezinski account today, it is important to remember the political and emotional backdrop against



Test run. A rehearsal at dusk in February 1980 for the rescue mission.

which the drama was played. As efforts at negotiations with the Iranians foundered and months passed, the 1980 Presidential primaries continued, with the incumbent facing a stubborn challenge from within his own party. Public pressure on the Administration to do something — almost anything — to break the stalemate was mounting. Television commentators were adding to the tension by ticking off the days of captivity with each nightly broadcast. Within the Administration, the strains between the White House and the State Department had reached the breaking point and the rescue attempt ultimately led to the resignation of the Secretary of State, Cyrus R. Vance.

In the midst of all this was Brzezinski, the strong-willed, Polish-born hardliner, whose task was to coordinate and synthesize the different views of the Departments of State and Defense and the C.I.A. and present them to the President. As this account reveals, the professor-turned-adviser had strong views of his own about how and when the rescue should be mounted.

— Terence Smith

Zbigniew Brzezinski is currently writing a book for Farrar, Straus & Giroux on his years as President Carter's national security adviser, which